

...that in the case of imprisoned Indonesian atheist Alexander Aan, the freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief also protects the right not to believe?

Both the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Article 18) support the freedom of an individual or community to publically manifest a religion or belief, to change religions or not to follow any religion. As atheism is a form of belief, atheists enjoy protection under international law. Indonesia ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in 2006, though the world's most populous Islamic country officially recognizes only six religions (Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Catholicism, and Protestantism) and has a 1965 law that outlaws blasphemy and the dissemination of atheism.

In recent years, Indonesian human organizations have criticized the government for supporting restrictions and condoning intolerance against non-Islamic groups, such as the Ahmadiyah. USCIRF's 2012 Annual Report documents severe religious freedom problems in Indonesia and details troubling cases of violence and government approved restrictions on religious minorities. The Indonesia chapter of the Annual Report can be found at <http://www.uscifr.gov/reports-and-briefs/individual-country-chapters/3371.html>

The case of Alexander Aan, a 31-year-old civil servant from Padang, West Sumatra, again raises Indonesia's growing restrictions on the freedom of religion and belief. Aan was arrested

for creating a Facebook group called *Ateis Minang* (Minang Atheists) and posting questions about the existence of god and cartoons depicting and insulting the Prophet Muhammad. Angered by the content of this Facebook page, a mob brutally beat Aan, who was turned over to police and initially charged with blasphemy, though those charges later were dropped.

In June 2012, Aan was sentenced to prison for two and half years for violating Article 28 of Indonesia's Information and Electronic Transaction Law (2008) for "disseminating information aimed at inciting religious hatred or hostility." Aan reportedly is no longer an atheist and has stated publicly that he has "returned" to Islam during his incarceration.

Aan's lawyers have appealed his sentence to the Indonesian Supreme Court.

The holding of atheistic beliefs or their propagation should not be considered a criminal act. Atheism should be viewed as an expression of conscience by individuals who do not embrace theistic beliefs and should be protected by governments under the rights to the freedom of religion and expression. International human rights covenants, to which Indonesia is a party, protect the right to the freedom of religion and expression in any form, including electronic and internet-based modes of expression.